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ABSTRACT

To determine what influences a teacher in providing reading instruction requires surveying more than one body of literature. It is important to note that the findings of any study are shaped by the questions that are asked and by the methods used to answer them. Although a large amount of research demonstrates overwhelmingly that teachers can acquire a variety of instructional skills and that various program formats can facilitate their development, these studies do not indicate the best way for developing a particular behavior. Only a small amount of research has attempted to identify and compare the range of things which influence how reading is taught. To determine the range of experiences that influence reading teachers, one study analyzed descriptions using an open-ended critical incident technique. The study concluded that almost anything that occurs in a reading classroom has the potential for influencing a teacher's attitude or behavior. Also, it may be that teachers are more influenced by events that happen by chance during daily school activities than by those that are planned as part of a formal training program. Reading education programs should provide high-impact, immediate-feedback situations since research has shown that these situations influence reading teachers the most. By following this procedure, programs stand a better chance of having an effect upon teacher attitudes and actions, which in turn positively affect a child's reading achievement. (HOD)

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Paper Presented At The

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What Influences a Teacher in Providing Reading Instruction: A Research View

by

Jesse C. Moore

I am sure that each of you believe as I do that a competent teacher is a very important factor in successful reading instruction. Essentially, we believe that a teacher's attitudes and actions while teaching reading are crucial variables which affect a child's reading development. It is evident that we believe this because throughout a given teacher's career many people try to influence these attitudes and teaching behaviors. There are the professors in the undergraduate and graduate reading methods courses, the speakers at in-service workshops and reading conferences, and the school district administrators and supervisors.

Although these people may be sincere in their attempts to influence that teacher, they may be less than successful because the content and format of their teacher training efforts are based on tradition ("That's the way I was taught."), convenience ("I don't have the proper resources."), and personal preference ("I think it's a darn good idea.") rather than on research.

This situation is understandable because it is not an easy task to locate much of the appropriate research. To determine what influences a teacher in providing reading instruction requires surveying more than one body of literature. For instance, pertinent information can be found in the research on teacher education, teacher expectations, teacher effectiveness, and teacher-student interaction. Also, because there is not one group of easily identifiable studies, it is not difficult to lose sight of the type

of information for which one is looking. The simplistic flow chart below is useful for establishing a perspective when examining the related research.

X------->	Teacher	(Knowledge) (Behaviors)------> (Attitudes)	Student	(Abilities) (Achievement) (Attitudes)

Essentially, this chart illustrates two relationships. The first is between "X" and such things as what teachers know about reading, how they feel about reading and what they do while providing reading instruction. Harste (1977) and Allington (1980) concluded as a result of their respective studies that when teachers plan for and conduct reading lessons, they do not do so in a random, unorganized way. Rather, the behaviors teachers exhibit are influenced by something.

The second relationship is concerned with "teacher effectiveness," and this topic has received much attention in recent years. The summaries by Brophy (1979), Ornstein and Levine (1981), Taylor (1981), and Kean et. al. (1979) present a relatively clear picture of what research says an effective teacher does in the classroom. The concern of this paper, however, is to synthesize briefly the research findings related to influences on teachers of reading, that is, to identify "X".

It is important to note that the findings of any study are shaped by the form of the questions which are asked and by the methods which are used to answer them. In other words, the way the research is conducted limits and shapes the findings. I would like now to consider "X" by asking and attempting to answer three questions.

Can formal training programs influence teachers?

The results of virtually hundreds of investigations which have attempted to determine if a given ability or attitude can be acquired through a particular type of experience provide the answer--a definitive "yes." To cite just one example, Strickler (1973) had a group of teachers participate in a training program which focused on teaching reading as a decoding process. By the end of the program, the classroom behaviors of these teachers had changed significantly; they had acquired and were using a group of new teaching techniques. Also, it was found that the pupils of these teachers made significantly greater gains in reading achievement.

Although a large amount of research overwhelmingly demonstrates that teachers can acquire a variety of instructional skills and that various program formats can facilitate their development, these studies do not indicate the best way for developing a particular behavior. A given study may show that one procedure works but not that it is best. Also, there is some evidence that although a teacher may exhibit desired behaviors or attitudes while participating in a training program or research study, these behaviors or attitudes may not continue indefinitely. Morrison et. al. (1969) and Wilson and Blum (1981) found that organizational and instructional procedures adopted for a research study and viewed favorably by the teachers using them while the study was in progress, were abandoned in favor of previously used procedures once the study was completed.

What influences teachers the most?

Only a small amount of research has attempted to identify and compare the range of things which influence how reading is taught. Barton and Wilder (1964) used a structured questionnaire to determine the extent to which teachers felt a number of specific items influenced their beliefs and opinions

on teaching reading. They found that the most important influence was the reading series and the accompanying teacher's manuals. The second most important influence was a teacher's reading of professional articles and books on reading methodology.

It is not hard to believe that the basal teacher's manual with its explicit instructional guidelines exerts the strongest influence on classroom instruction. This belief, however, seems to be based more on personal impressions than on direct research. Two reports by Durkin (1978-1979, 1981) help to illustrate this conclusion.

The first study was an observational one conducted to determine the extent and type of comprehension instruction occurring in elementary classrooms. Although Durkin expected to see teacher's manuals being used extensively, she found that they were not. Rather, she reported that manuals were referred to only to identify new vocabulary words, to determine what questions should be asked after students had read a story, and to make workbook assignments. She also reported her impression that teachers seemed intent on completing the stories as rapidly as possible so that pupils could get to the seatwork. Thus, she concluded that the workbook materials had significant influence on what the teachers were doing. Because she saw practically no comprehension instruction, she concluded that reading methodology textbooks do not influence teachers because these books describe procedures which can be used to improve comprehension.

In the 1981 study, Durkin examined all of the teacher's manuals in five leading basal reading series to see what they suggested for comprehension instruction. Because this data seemed to closely match the teacher behaviors in the first study, she concluded that "basal reader manuals help to account for the fact that little comprehension instruction was seen when classroom

teachers were observed." (p. 528) Although these are important studies, they really do not provide a clear, direct picture of the influence of teacher's manuals or reading methods textbooks.

This writer (Moore, 1974) attempted to determine the range of experiences which influenced reading teachers. Instead of a structured questionnaire, such as the one used by Barton and Wilder, the open-ended Critical Incident Technique was used. Descriptions were collected of more than 650 incidents which influenced elementary teachers in providing reading instruction. The incidents clearly supported the conclusion drawn by Joyce and Showers (1980) that teachers are influenced mostly by events which occur during actual instruction in a classroom setting. No incident mentioned a teacher's manual or a reading methodology textbook, and only 22% of the incidents involved the teacher being given information about reading. The participation in or observation of a real or simulated classroom was described in 78% of the incidents. It was the things teachers did and the things students did while instruction was occurring which seemed to affect teachers the most.

Because of the variety of influential incidents reported, it was concluded that just about anything that occurs in a reading classroom has the potential for influencing some teacher's attitude or behavior. Also, it may be that teachers are more influenced by events that happen by chance during daily school activities than by those which are planned as part of a formal training program.

An interesting study by Deal and Celotti (1980) may explain why. Their results portray the classroom as a relatively autonomous unit which is shielded from formal influence by the community, the district office, the principal, and other teachers. They state, "Because in schools, there is little pressure on

teachers from above, students can potentially exert more control over instructional activities than community expectations or the formal chain of command." (p. 473)

How should reading education programs be conducted?

Essentially, such a program at both the undergraduate and graduate levels should be organized around a classroom setting. The research shows that teachers are motivated by their belief that what they do in their classrooms makes a difference to the children they teach. They need to see the connection between what they are trying to do and what effects these attempts have on students.

The goals of the program should be practical, that is, they should relate directly to classroom activities, and the needs and desires of the teachers being trained should be incorporated as much as possible. For maximum influence, each goal should be developed through a series of specific steps. First, there should be the presentation of information and theory. Generally, I think we do a good job of this, but it is only the first step. Next there should be the observation of demonstration lessons which should be followed by discussions between the teacher and the trainees. Finally, practice sessions for each trainee should be held, first in a simulated setting and then in a real classroom. After each practice session the trainee should be given immediate feedback concerning his or her performance. The research has shown that these high-impact, immediate-feedback situations are what influences reading teachers the most. By following this procedure, we stand a better chance of having an effect upon teacher attitudes and actions which in turn affect a child's reading achievement.

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